

# Ten lessons learned while killing a church

by Joe Oakley

*Editor's Note: We want to thank Joe for his courage in sharing this article. We think the body of Christ would be healthier if everyone were so honest and transparent.*

I recently had the privilege of sitting down and talking "church" with Rick Warren for an hour. It's an incredible story that I wish I had time to tell, but here I was, the pastor of a small, new church, sitting down with the man who wrote the best-selling book on the church in history!

I found Rick easy to talk to, and I was amazed that he was willing to answer all my questions. However, he didn't stop there. He also wanted to know about me, the church I pastor, how we got started, how we're doing, etc. He truly is a pastor's pastor.

In the course of the conversation, I told Rick that I'd previously started a church that died a long, slow, painful death. He asked me what I learned from that experience and then actually started taking notes as I spoke.

Of course, I'm thinking, "What can Rick Warren learn from me?"

Fortunately, I actually HAD learned some major lessons from the death of that church, so I immediately responded with a long list.

Surprisingly, Rick seemed impressed and asked me, "Would you be willing to write an article for my web site? I think pastors need to hear this." I realized that Rick was interested in what I had to say because of his pastor's heart to help other pastors.

Of course I had to think about it ... for about 5 milliseconds. I was eager to share what I learned with other pastors so that they might be spared some of what I went through.

First, let me give you a little background:

My wife, Deborah, and I started a church about 10 years ago called The Love of Christ Community Church (TLC for short). We grew from a handful of people to about 100 within a couple of years.

Unfortunately, our growth stagnated and for a number of reasons, we began a slow decline. Ultimately, we closed the church, vowing to never go through that pain again.

We were out of ministry for a few years, simply attending church and healing. Eventually - after some major soul searching and seeking the will of God - we felt led to plant a church in a new growing area. We started Grace Fellowship Church with six people in a home about a year ago, and we're now up to about 150 people.

We determined to make the death of our previous church experience a learning experience. We do not want to repeat the same mistakes.

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**So, here we go with 10 lessons I learned from the death of a church.**  
**Lesson #1 – Get On Your Knees and Fight Like a Man**

While we were in the healing process, my wife and two other ladies began meeting for a year to pray about a ministry they thought they would be starting. It's a long story, but it turns out they were praying for our church plant all along.

When we finally submitted to the Lord's call to plant another church, our first priority was prayer. At TLC, we felt we could effectively plant a church. This time around we know we can't. It's the Lord who builds His church. Our part is to pray, hear from Him, and do what He tells us. We bathed this new church in prayer long before our first service. We recruited everyone we know to pray and intercede for us.

***We learned that the enemy attacks new works.*** You can see this pattern clearly in the Bible. When God sent Moses to deliver Israel, Pharaoh killed all the babies. When God sent His Son to redeem the world, Herod killed all the babies. Satan attacks new works because they are most vulnerable in their infancy. We were not prepared at TLC for the incredible amount of spiritual warfare that would take place. The enemy attacked us, our family and our church.

This time, we learned to pray and do spiritual warfare before even starting. We learned that prayer is a priority we can never let slide. Prayer is the hardest thing to sustain because it's the thing the enemy fears the most.

**Lesson #2 - You Can't Do It Alone**

When we started TLC, we did it all alone. Since that time God gave us a greater revelation of His kingdom. We came to see that there is one church with many congregations. There is one body with many parts. We need each other!

As a result, this time we networked with other churches. We joined a group of churches for fellowship and support even before we decided to start a church. We just knew God was up to something, and we wanted to be plugged in with other churches. When we did start Grace, the other churches helped by providing prayer, people, training and resources.

We learned we need the body of Christ. We really do need each other and we really do complete each other, not compete with each other.

**Lesson #3 - Teamwork Makes the Dream Work**

When we started TLC, the team was me, my wife and a close friend. Right before our first meeting, our friend informed us that she was moving to another state. So we were all alone. We forged ahead, but ended up frustrated and burnt out.

We learned you cannot do ministry alone. We need a team of leaders around us. I learned my job is to raise up a team of leaders who will raise up other

leaders. This time, we did not start Grace until we had a committed team of leaders.

#### **Lesson #4 - Location, location, location**

We started TLC in a home, then moved to a hotel on Sundays and a daycare on Wednesday nights. Doing "portable church" is very difficult, and we soon looked for a building. The only thing we could afford was far from our target area. We got a great deal on a great building, but it was in a declining area that was becoming more industrial.

The people who lived in the area had been there for years and were not interested in a new church. The people we had were not excited about the area we were now in.

I learned that when you start out, where you start out is important. This time, we started in a booming area where thousands of people will be moving in the next few years. God is bringing the mission field to us.

#### **Lesson #5 - The Sick Need A Physician; The Well Want Out of the Hospital**

We had a target audience at TLC of people from the recovery movement (support groups, etc,) and what I call "dechurched" Christians. These are people who had been in church at one time, but who left because of hurt, burn-out or other reasons.

We did a great job attracting these people and they came. However, we soon realized that hardly anyone wanted to do anything other than sit, be fed and get healed. That's okay, but we needed others to help minister to those in need.

I felt the Lord asked me this question much later, "What do people want when they are in the hospital?"

My answer was simply, "They want to get well."

I felt the Lord impressing me that there was more than this obvious answer. As I thought about it, this came to me: when you are in the hospital, not only do you want to get better, but you want to get out of there as soon as possible.

That was our experience at TLC. People did get better, but when they did, they left! They did not want to hang around all the other sick people. They wanted to be in a more "healthy" environment.

We learned you must focus on health, not sickness. Also, you need enough doctors, nurses and attendants to care for the sick.

#### **Lesson #6 - Leader of the Band**

In reading **The Purpose Driven Church**, I learned that Rick regrets underestimating the power of an excellent music ministry at the beginning of Saddleback. Likewise, our worship at TLC mainly consisted of me on an acoustic guitar.

As we started Grace, we determined to have a good band with good sound from the beginning. We spent the money to get nice equipment, and we recruited musicians from a sister church who had an overabundance. They started with us in our first service outside of a home. The wonderful thing is that experienced musicians attract other experienced musicians. We learned that great worship and praise, good musicians and sound are important.

### **Lesson #7 - A Little Child Shall Lead Them**

At TLC, we just rotated parents to take care of the children. The children's ministry was more like babysitting than teaching. One of the main reasons for our decline was that the building we were renting sold, and we had to move out immediately. We went from a building with abundant space for children and youth to a hotel with no room for either. People with children began to leave. They loved us, but we had nothing to offer their children. When we started our new church, God graciously sent a mature, seasoned couple who have an incredible heart for children. Many unchurched families have come to our church and stayed, not because of me or our great worship, but because the kids beg them to come back every week. I learned that an exciting, fun, informative children's ministry is vitally important.

### **Lesson #8 - If You Build It, They May Not Come**

Looking back at TLC, I'm amazed we drew anyone. We really did nothing to tell people what we had to offer. We just started meeting and prayed people would show up. Our field of dreams became an empty field of nightmares. I read a quote from Tommy Barnett once that really impacted me: *Without vision, people perish. Without people, the vision perishes.*

**Vision is one thing. Communicating it is something else.** We learned we can't adopt the "field of dreams" mentality and just sit around waiting for people to show up. After all, the Great Commission is to go - not to stay, wait and grumble when they don't show up. We learned that having a vision, building or great events are not enough; you must get the word out. "Come and see" must be balanced by "Go and tell."

### **Lesson #9 - You Get What You Expect**

At TLC, we had low expectations of our people and did not require much from them. After all, they were recovering, burnt out people. They lived down to our expectations.

We learned to raise the bar on expectations. I was impacted by a book by Thom Rainer entitled **High Expectations**. In it, he presents research proving that growing churches have high expectations of their members.

This was confirmed by Rick in **The Purpose Driven Church**. I saw Saddleback required covenantal commitment at every level, from congregation to core. They had a membership covenant, a maturity covenant, a ministry covenant and a mission covenant. The expectations were high and clear to everyone.

At Grace, we have taken this covenantal approach. We were committed at TLC, but now the commitment goes both ways.

### **Lesson #10 - Failing Is Not Final**

I learned from John Maxwell to fail forward by learning from my mistakes.

***Failing is not failure unless you keep repeating the same mistakes or give up.***

Every living thing has a life cycle - including churches. Some live long, some not so long. However, I do believe we can shorten the life cycle needlessly. Before planting another church, I prayed, studied and sought counsel so I could learn from my mistakes in order to not repeat them again. Prayerfully, this will help someone else not to repeat them either.

I have taken much comfort from the fact that we ministered to many people at TLC and had a major impact in their lives. To this day, many come up to me and say, "I wouldn't have made it if TLC was not there for me at that time. Thank you."

Even though that congregation no longer exists, I know that many lives were touched, changed, or restored, and they are now productive members of other churches.

Or should I say, our church, the one church. Developing a kingdom mentality will drive out competition with other churches when we realize we are all in this together and it takes us all to reach our world!

I pray that something I have learned will help you as you extend the kingdom of God in your area!

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